

#202 BURTON WILLIAMS: USS *DOBBIN*

Steven Haller (SH): My name is Steven Haller and we're at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel on December 4, 1991. It's 3:30 PM and I have the pleasure to be speaking with Mr. Burton Williams today. Mr. Williams was Torpedoman Second Class on the destroyer, USS *BAGLEY*. However, on December 7, 1941, he was on detach[ed] duty, serving aboard the submarine tender.

Burton Williams (BW): Tender, destroyer tender.

SH: Excuse me. Of course, destroyer tender. Thank you.

(Conversation off-mike.)

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

--: Take two.

SH: My name is Steven Haller and we're at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel on December 4, 1991. It's 3:30 PM and I have the pleasure of speaking with Burton Williams. Mr. Williams was a Torpedoman Second Class, assigned to the USS *BAGLEY*, a destroyer. However, at the time of the attack on December 7, he was on detach[ed] duty aboard the destroyer tender, USS *DOBBIN*.

BW: DOBBIN.

SH: We're producing this tape for the oral history program of the USS *ARIZONA* Memorial, of the National Park Service, in conjunction with KHET-TV, Honolulu.

So I want to thank you very much, Mr. Williams, for being with us today.

BW: It's a pleasure.

SH: And I'd like to ask you, first of all, to tell us how you got into the Navy.

BW: I had enlisted in the Navy in 1938. And at that time, the U.S. was pretty well in the depression and jobs were hard to find and so I enlisted in the U.S. Navy. And I was assigned to the USS *BAGLEY*, and *BAGLEY* was transferred to the Hawaiian fleet in 1940.

SH: Did you want to join destroyers? Was that a choice of yours or you were just assigned to . . .

BW: I actually picked a destroyer 'cause I had a cousin on it at the time. And he and I grew up together and I picked the *BAGLEY* to be with him.

SH: Did you stay together, with him, for a while?

BW: Until he left the *BAGLEY* in 1940.

SH: When did --- where'd you join the *BAGLEY* and when did she head to Pearl Harbor?

BW: I joined the *BAGLEY* in San Diego, California. Yeah, between Christmas and New Year's of 1938.

SH: When you got to Hawaii, what was the usual sort of peace time routine? What kind of things would you be doing on *BAGLEY*? What assignments did she have?

BW: I started in with the torpedo department and we were always constantly on maneuvers, out and around the Hawaiian islands and with the U.S. fleet.

SH: Were the maneuvers sort of the variety? Did you do anti-submarine, a balance of offensive and defensive kind of work?

BW: Yeah. Yeah. Yes, defensive. Anti-aircraft maneuvers a lot and submarine defense with the fleet, whatever they wanted. The destroyers are used for kind of a screen on the larger ships and fleet.

SH: As torpedoman, what were your primary duties? What would you spend your time doing, usually?

BW: On the *BAGLEY*, we used to maintain the torpedo tubes, which we had sixteen torpedoes aboard. And we maintained the main tubes and launching equipment. And a lot of times on practice firings, we'd go out and did a lot of practice work with torpedoes.

SH: When did you end up on *DOBBIN*? How did that come about?

BW: Somewhere in the end of October or early November, I was sent to the USS *DOBBIN* to work in the torpedo overhaul shop, that did the repair work or overhaul for all the torpedoes and the destroyers.

SH: Was that common to be sent to another ship, a person in your specialty?

BW: TAD duty was very common.

SH: Around the --- in the weeks prior to the attack, did you notice any particular heightened sense of alertness, or readiness, or tension in the air? Could you describe that?

BW: I thought there was during -- when we was maneuvering with the fleet and I felt this, as time went on, from 1940, '39 and '40, and things kept picking up. And then there was a lot of reserve units coming in from the military and you could tell it was a kind of a build up. That was standard. And then, of course, the war in Europe and everybody felt that eventually, we would be in it, one way or the other.

SH: How about just before the -- immediately prior to the attack, was there any heightened sense of alert at that time?

BW: Being on the *DOBBIN* in the repair facility for in excess of a month, I really was not exposed to very much at that time.

SH: You told a story before as we were conversing about the interference on maneuvers that destroyers occasionally got from fishing boats. Could you describe that?

BW: That's what *DOBBIN* went through. That was on the shore, when we had maneuvers out around the islands that we noticed that it seems like every time we had maneuvers, a couple of fishing boats, two or three of 'em, wind up in the area. And we'd move maneuvers from one place to another, and it seemed like the fishing boats would always wind up at the just top. We never boarded one, but it just seemed kind of odd that we were being shadowed all the time.

SH: But as far as you knew, nothing was ever done.

BW: Not that --- officially not, no.

SH: Well, why don't we close in on the fateful December 7? What was the day before like? Was there anything special in your routine?

BW: Not at all. No, none at all.

SH: Did you spend that night on the *DOBBIN*?

BW: I was aboard the hip all weekend. And there was nothing to indicate, I mean, to my knowledge. The next morning, on Sunday morning, all the fellows that was there on T.A. duty, the same as I was on the *DOBBIN*, we berthed right in the torpedo shop. We had the cots that we stored away in the day time. And we had a place where we done our own laundry and that Sunday morning, I had got up. We had a coffee pot there and I believe I had gone to breakfast already, earlier. And was --- come back and was doing our laundry. And about several of us were sitting there, doing our laundry and having a cup of coffee. And in the torpedo shop, there was a large cargo door that we used for bringing the torpedoes in and out of the repair shop. And it was open. We kept it open all the time, with the weather here. And first thing we knew, why, we were sitting there having coffee and working with our laundry and I heard a -- it sounded like a machine gun going off and then like a bomb explosion. And we wondered what was happening and went to the cargo door. And just as I arrived to the door, I seen a plane banked in a circle around, pulling out, rather, and he banked around and I could see it was a Japanese plane. And realized right there, what it was. I know, myself, and the other fellows there too. We realized that -- when we seen all the planes buzzing around, you know. I think it was one of the first planes that come in, that we heard. And in the time we looked out, why, they were all over the place. So we realized what was happening.

SH: What did . . .

BW: There was no doubt in our minds. I don't think.

SH: No doubt, right away, you knew what was going.

BW: Mm-hm.

SH: Do you remember what kind -- have any idea what kind of plane that was?

BW: No.

SH: Whether it was a torpedo or . . .

BW: I --- no. I don't think it was a torpedo plane. I --- from my own remembrance that torpedo planes were not used at that spot, where the USS *DOBBIN* was berthed. Just around the corner from the *ARIZONA*.

SH: Right, that's what I was perhaps suggesting.

BW: And more torpedo planes come in from the fleet landing over at the Navy yard and where they had -- and being a torpedo man, I seen information later on the fact that Japan had to change their torpedoes from the normal procedure to get 'em into the water without 'em exploding, and to be armed by the time they got to the target, which was quite different than the normal routine on torpedoes.

SH: Once you recognized these planes as Japanese, what happened then?

BW: I think, as I remember, several of us, we run to the topside to see if we could help in anti-aircraft fire. And at the time, and then shortly after, they called all of us torpedo men to this six destroyers along side, or five destroyers along side. And they called all of us torpedo men to go over and help arm the torpedoes that was on the destroyers. And as we had to take the armor plate out of the warhead and install the detonators, and then put it back. And we did it from underneath, by laying on our back and bolting them back in. And the destroyers, as they got up enough steam to have the light off boiler. And of course, they were pretty well, at that time, along side of a tender. Normally, they shut down on their stealth power and used power from the tender.

So they had to get light off boilers and get up steam. And by the time they got up their steam and we got their torpedoes armed, they left as soon as they get one down, he would leave and they went out of the harbor.

SH: You described arming these torpedoes and if I understood you correctly, you said there was an armor plate of some sort? On the torpedo was that covering where the fuse was?

BW: On the warhead of the torpedo, on the bottom side, there's a mechanism for arming, the torpedo has. When they were launched from a ship or air, it had to run through the water so many yards with a little impeller that armed the torpedo. So we had to put the explosive detonator in that ignited the warhead. And we took this plate out and put in the mechanism, or the detonator, and then put it back to armed position. So all they had to do is fire if it went out.

SH: How long --- do you have any sense of the time and how long it took for all these six destroyers to get out of there?

BW: No. I know we were still working on 'em when the second group of planes come in.

SH: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

BW: And I don't think it was, as I remember, long after that we had cut 'em all out.

SH: Was the DOBBIN able to fire on any of these planes? Or was it too hard for you to tell?

BW: Not being in the ship's company, I didn't know very many people on the ship and I understand they did get their machine guns out. But as they were, just like a lot of the other ships, see, the machine guns were stored away in the armory and most cases, the ammunition. So all of that had to be brought out. And they had cases where they had a hard time rounding up the guy with the key to the armory, or to cut the bolt, or whatever they had. A lot of them did that, they cut the bolts and broke into the armory and got the machine guns, and got 'em out. But how much firing the DOBBIN did, I don't know.

SH: After all these destroyers, then you were back on DOBBIN?

BW: Mm-hm. Yeah, I went back on DOBBIN. I stayed there until that night, and then I went back aboard my -- from that ship -- back.

SH: You were able to take a launcher, or something?

BW: Well, we knew that some of the destroyers had dropped some of their depth charges, submarine and weapons. And so on, the DOBBIN carried a supply of replacement depth charges. So we loaded a fifty motor launch with a lot of 600 pound depth charges, and as the ships come in -- they didn't come in 'til about dark, or a little after dark. So the ones that did come back. And we went around the harbor just to get anybody that needed depth charges and everything was -- there was no lights anywhere, so we had to maintain darkness, and we took this motor launch with the depth charges on it, and anybody who needed replacements, why, we put 'em aboard.

And we got to the BAGLEY, my own ship, why, that's where I went back aboard the BAGLEY.

SH: I understand that at least some people were pretty jittery that night.

BW: Oh yes. Very much so.

SH: What was it like, going around on a, you know, darkened motor launch in this harbor? Did you get fired upon?

BW: No. Not to my knowledge. (Chuckles)

SH: Did you hear any shots that went off in the distance?

BW: No. I didn't hear any -- we were on over at another anchorage area, when those naval planes come in, got shot down by -- I really don't have too much on information. The only thing is I know that it did happen.

SH: Did you have to sort of expend a little extra energy to identify yourself? Did anybody ever challenge you while you were going around?

BW: Oh yes. Oh yes. Yeah.

SH: So you ended up on the BAGLEY. Finally got back on your ship.

BW: Yeah. And we started operating out of Pearl and we went, whatever the maneuvers were at the time, I think. The Wake Islands trips was the first one we went on to relieve the pressure on Wake Islands.

SH: Immediately after that Pearl Harbor attack, what was *BAGLEY*'s assignment? Do you recall exactly what you did?

BW: There was a lot of patrol on the outside and at that time, my recollection, I don't remember exactly what days or what, but we were out on patrol. And then we went into the -- assigned to the fleet with the *SARATOGA*, and went to Wake Island.

SH: What's your most vivid memory of the day of the attack itself?

BW: That's hard to say. I've often thought of it as the things that's happened in my life, and I don't think I was afraid. I --- the only time I remember during World War II being afraid was before the shots started, before any shooting started. And --- but once it happened, there seemed to be more relaxed kind of a I --- during an attack, it's hard to say. We were so concerned. And as soon as we got busy, we just really didn't pay much attention. We were just doing what we should do. And we was getting the destroyers ready to get under way, alongside the *DOBBIN*, why, during the second attack, and we knew it was going on, but we didn't -- we just kept on doing what we were doing. And I thought everybody was very calm. And I . . .

SH: Did you feel, well, rather than ask a leading question, let me just say, what did you feel about the Japanese at the time, as this attack was going by? You said you realized that it was the Japanese right away.

BW: Yeah, yeah. We knew.

SH: What was the reaction to that?

BW: I --- it's hard to answer. I realized by being a military man that they were doing what they were supposed to do, or told to do, the same as we were doing. And I guess there's no doubt there was a little remorse there. I would guess, but at the time, actually, during that time, during the attack, I don't think we stopped to think about that, really. Or I don't believe I did. We were more or less trained to do a certain thing, you go do it.

SH: How about after the attack?

BW: Well, yeah, I still don't think there was a lot of remorse. I . . .

SH: Remorse, you said?

BW: I don't think so, no. It --- it's hard to explain. The --- as far as against the Japanese, I guess, no doubt, you do. But you feel something . . . it's hard for me to answer. But . . .

SH: How about --- now that the years have passed, what do you think about the Japanese today?

BW: Today?

SH: Yeah, the nation or the people?

BW: I have nothing against them. I spent a lot of time in Japan during the Korean War. I have nothing against them. And I didn't feel anything, if it could be back to this, right after Pearl Harbor.

SH: Yeah, please go on.

BW: A lot of that I read about, the conditions and then they rounded up the local Japanese and I never did know much about that. But I never really gave it too much of a thought. I do know that it was quite a controversy about it, but me not being personally involved in it, I . . . and then, as years go on, I had nothing. I made a comment yesterday to the paper about the apology, and to me, our bitterness was over the fact that there was no war declared. And it was, at the time, you know, and there was no war declared, so we didn't think much of that really. But I've never had anything against the Japanese, personally. 'Cause I spent, let's see, quite a bit of time there, during the Korean War in Japan and I have nothing.

SH: Did you stay on *BAGLEY* throughout the war?

BW: I went through to 1943 and June of 1943, down in Australia, and I left the *BAGLEY* and went back to new construction put a new destroyer in commission. And to go on with that one, during the invasion of Okinawa, the new destroyer got put in commission. We were sunk in Okinawa.

SH: What was the name of that vessel?

BW: USS *CALLAGHAN*.

SH: The *CALLAGHAN*.

BW: And that was named after the admiral that was killed in Guadalcanal, on the *SAN FRANCISCO*. And we were sunk by a kamikaze plane at Okinawa.

SH: We understand . . .

BW: At least . . .

SH: Were you a torpedoman at that point too?

BW: Mm-hm. At 12:30 at night, we were sunk at Okinawa.

SH: How did that occur?

BW: Pardon?

SH: How did that . . .

BW: We were out on a picket line, sixty-five miles west of Okinawa and there was always the planes trying to find us at night. And they come in at night to keep away from the fighter aircraft. And they finally found us and one plane come aboard and had a bomb with it and so on. And the bomb went into the engine room.

SH: You say that you stayed in the Navy -- did you make a career? You obviously made a career out of . . .

BW: Mm-hm, yes I did.

SH: . . . the Navy.

BW: Mm-hm, I put twenty-two years. I spent twenty-two years in here.

SH: And stayed with it in Japan? Where else?

BW: Yeah. I --- after the war was over, when I could get out, why, I'd been there almost a year or so. I just wound up staying. And I have no regrets on it at all. And I was on the --- in the Korean War, I was on an aircraft carrier.

SH: Interesting.

BW: We operated in and out. We could spend thirty days out and off the line in Korea and then back in Japan only for ten days to two weeks, for repairs or whatever. But I have no regrets about my naval career. No, I don't.

SH: It certainly doesn't sound like you have any reason to.

BW: Yeah.

SH: Well, Mr. Williams, I think I'd like to thank you very much for the time that you spent.

BW: Thank you.

SH: It's been very interesting having a conversation with you today.

BW: Thank you.

SH: Appreciate it very much for joining us today.

BW: My pleasure.

SH: Thank you, sir.

END OF INTERVIEW